

LITTLE BLUE BOOK NO. 1130  
Edited by E. Haldeman-Julius

# The Dark Ages

Joseph McCabe

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## THE DARK AGES

### I

#### THE MAKING OF THE MIDDLE AGES

One Sunday morning in the year 1922 I stood for an hour closely packed in a crowd of Bulgar peasants. We were at the frontier railway depot, at six in the morning. It was the festival of some ancient saint as well as a Sunday; and from the Serb side hundreds of peasants were crossing into their native Bulgaria for a day. They were mostly women, in spotless white linen and gaudily embroidered vests and skirts. Even the few men were sober, at that hour. But . . . I looked into the scores of pairs of eyes all round me and wondered. They were the eyes of their cattle, lit by a dull gleam, a dawn, of human kindliness and intelligence; and in their depths one could see or surmise slumbering passions which cattle never know.

From depot to depot along the slow route the train emptied and refilled with such crowds. As the hours passed, the gait of the men grew unsteadier and their raucous voices louder, and the laughter of the women rang out over the idle fields.

For lunch I had to pass through their third-class coach. A burly assistant literally rammed a narrow way for me through the sweating mass. They were too happy to grumble. One man had a big drum on the train. They were



packed four to the square yard. The aroma of strong native wine clung like a mist. The bovine eyes now shone with animal vitality. The gaping roaring mouths of the men, the faint pretense of reserve in the women's laughter, the mutual glances of the little girls, told the nature of the jokes that were thundered above the babel.

On the previous Sunday I had been in Vienna: one of the loveliest, most captivating, most urbane and refined cities on the globe. In a week I had passed back from 1922 to 922 or thereabouts: from modern times to the Middle Ages.

There has been a queer movement of civilization in the course of time. Once all civilization flourished round the Mediterranean Sea. The "Mediterranean Race" was the great race. Beyond the Alps, beyond the Danube, were mere barbarians. They seemed as unlikely as the Negroes south of the Sahara ever to build cities and write philosophies. But civilization passed to "the great white race," and round the Mediterranean were only beggarly remnants of the ancient peoples, as idly contemplating the ruins of their former greatness as the sheep and goats that browsed amongst the marble columns.

Worn-out stocks, you may say: exhausted national germ-plasms, and so on. Those are words: "wind of words and nothing more," as the realistic old Romans used to say. The outstanding characteristic of those masses of peasants of southern Europe is their immense

vitality. They work from sun-up to sun-down. The orgy of a festival is an orgy of vitality bursting loose on rare holidays from the year's slavery. Their sex-virility is stupendous. Their anger, slumbering under an habitual kindness, flames like an explosive. They love war. Shake out the old flag, let the bugle peal, and they will leap to the ranks.

And it is not mere animal vitality. No country now is wholly medieval. The Serbs have myriads of schools. The Bulgars and Greeks reduce the illiteracy of their people. Spain has to move and drag its priests with it. Italy is being modernized even in the south. And the people are apt pupils.

I would rather consider them here as nearly all of them were half a century ago, as most of them still are: citizens of the Middle Ages lingering in the nineteenth century. An Italian artist and a very cultivated Constantinopolitan Jewess watched them with me on the train. "They are obviously happy," my companions said. Quite so; boisterously, uproariously happy, spluttering and bursting with happiness. Well, you say, that is the Middle Ages.

That question of happiness, a very old and worn theme of debate, occupies us in another book. Here it is enough to remind the reader of two facts. The first is that the happiness of these ignorant peasants, these survivors of the Middle Ages, is but a momentary burst of laughter in a long and mirthless day. They are happy—happy in this robust way—on a few days in the year. It is so long before

the next festival comes. Let us crowd what we can into the day. Twelve hours for the heart to rejoice in, and then . . . You see them next day emerge from the stinking cottages in the gray dawn, the girl of twelve spinning with the distaff as she goes to guard the cows all day, the young mother, perhaps yoked with the ass to a plow such as Mayas used in Yucatan two thousand years ago.

But there is a second and more precise test. Let us take, as I proposed, the Europe of the middle of the nineteenth century, when, the chief cities apart, the Middle Ages still lingered in the south and the modern spirit ruled in central and northern parts. And, remember, it is in the south that nature makes her most generous contributions to human happiness. There the roses bloom and grow all the year, and the skies have a glorious azure, and the sun rarely hides.

Well, look back on this contrast of modern and medieval in the Europe of the last century. South of parallel 45, the rough dividing line of the modern and the medieval, you have enormously more disease, suffering, crime, bloodshed, poverty, utter ignorance of the art of living, and insecurity of life and health than north of it. The statistics of mortality, especially infant mortality, in the south are ghastly. Mothers bear their eight or ten children, meantime performing the work of three servants, and bury four or five. Disease is like a legion of devils that God cannot, or will not, check. The knife flies from its sheath daily, and the widow and children mourn. Happy, are they?

That is the Middle Ages: a stretch of a thousand years during which crime, vice, violence, drunkenness, disease, mortality, brutality, exploitation, and injustice were immeasurably worse, as we shall see, than in the preceding or in our own time. Hourly we repeat the division time into two parts, B. C. and A. D., and millions still think that B. C. means Benighted Chaos and A. D. means Age of Delight. In history we divide time into three parts, Ancient Times, the Middle Ages, and Modern Times; and we consider the Middle Ages (as we ought to say) a period of dark and turbulent semi-barbarism lying between two phases of civilization, ancient paganism and modern paganism.

What redeeming features will even the apologist find in the Middle Ages? First—and almost last—medieval art: those glorious cathedrals that you go to Europe to see, those illuminated missals, those wonderful tapestries, those exquisite paintings, those feats of color and form. These artistic achievements are very real and important. They make one hesitate to call the *second half* of the Middle Ages barbaric: in the first half they did not yet exist. To understand aright their relation to medieval life in general and Christianity in particular we have to devote a special Little Blue Book to them. And we find that they must certainly not be put to the credit of religion.

What is there besides the art? The guilds of craftsmen? I have already shown that these affected only a tiny minority of the workers, were pagan in origin, and were fiercely resist-



ed by the Church until it found them irrepressible. What else is there? Nothing. The rest is misery, suffering, exploitation by priest and noble, appalling superstition, utter lawlessness, dense ignorance.

Moreover, let us be quite clear what we mean by the Middle Ages. Roughly we mean from about 500 A. D. when paganism and the Roman Empire were extinct, to about 1500 or 1600 A. D. The first half of this period, say from about 500 to 1100, we call the Dark Ages; and this is the proper subject of my book. A nice way, you may say, of studying Christendom, or the effect upon civilization of the adoption of Christianity: you end your study just when the great scholastic movement and the building of superb cathedrals begin!

One thing at a time. All claims for Christianity will be considered. But any man who really wishes to know what the effect of Christian influence was must first carefully study the world when it was *under Christian influence alone*. That is obvious. During and after the twelfth century other important influences entered. I show this in another book (*The Church and the School*, Little Blue Book No. 1128) in connection with the beginning of an intellectual or scholastic movement. Europe then began to feel the influence of the brilliant Moorish civilization, which I describe later. On the top of this, intensifying the effect, came the influence of ancient Greece through what we call the Renaissance; which also claims a special volume (Little Blue Book No. 1140).

So we take six centuries, 500 to 1100 A. D. (or even later), as the period in which we see most clearly the effect upon Europe of the acceptance of Christianity. This period is known to all historians as the Dark Ages, and the contents of the following chapters will fully justify the title.

We have, however, first to decide very conscientiously whether the Church was responsible for the Dark Ages, and the question at once arises if the degradation of Europe was not due to a force, the downpour of northern barbarians, the action of which it took the Church several centuries to correct.

Now it is quite true that these Goths, Vandals, and other Teutonic tribes destroyed the Roman civilization. It may seem to the inexpert an extraordinary thing that barbarians from the forests of Germany could thus overrun the mightiest empire of antiquity, but it is not surprising. For centuries these tribes had been multiplying and pressing against the northern barriers. Rome was now too weak to hold the barriers. The Huns from Asia had fallen upon the Germans and driven them furiously south. Then the news spread over the north of the sunny lands and glorious loot of the south, and fresh tribes came down. One must not imagine the onset of the Teutons as an event of the year, or even of a few decades. There were centuries of migration.

In the fifth century they completely wrecked the fabric of the Roman Empire; schools, law-courts, postal service, civil service, all disap-

peared. It is one of the greater ironies of life that this coincided with the general enforcement of Christianity. The naive young person, of any age, preacher or listener, who dreams of Europe rising in the moral scale when it "embraced Christianity," knows as much about history as the New Zealand young lady I once heard explaining Relativity to her husband and saying that "Euclid had based his system on Newton." The general acceptance (under pressure) of Christianity was inevitably followed by moral chaos, because it coincided with the downfall of civilization.

Then you find no fault with Christianity, the apologist will say, completely reversing his position, because it was not the *cause* of the degradation of Europe, the rise of serfdom, the destruction of the schools, the subjection of woman, etc.

Broad views are often good, and often dangerous. You must at least know the details. The first detail is that these "barbarians" were not so barbaric as some imagine. At the beginning of the second century, when the Romans were sober under the excellent Stoic emperors, the great historian Tacitus wrote a work on *The Morals of the Germans*: meaning the Teutonic tribes of the north generally. The purpose of that book was to shame the Romans by holding up to them the superior idealism of the Teutons! It is, of course, exaggerated; but there is truth in it. The northerners had law and some fine ideals.

The second detail is that they were Chris-

tians. The chief Germanic tribes which poured over Italy, Gaul, and Spain in the fifth century had already accepted Christianity; and few Christians have such superstitious awe of the power of priests and bishops as converted barbarians.

And the third and most important detail is that these "barbarians" gave proof after proof that they were ready to accept civilization. Numbers of them had risen to the highest positions in the Roman army and state even before the fifth century. Tradition has given the Vandals, who overran Spain and Africa, so terrible a reputation that we use their name still for destroyers or semi-barbarians. In most respects they were as bad as their reputation, but the leading authority on the Teutonic peoples, Dr. Hodgkin (*Italy and Her Invaders*, an eight-volume work which the reader should consult for details), calls them "an army of Puritans." In fact, the fifth-century priest Salvianus represents both Goths and Vandals as stern Puritans shocked by the immorality of the Christians of the Empire. He tells us that when the Vandals took Christian Carthage, they set about a purification of morals which disturbed the inhabitants far more than the loss of political freedom did. . . . And within two centuries of their adoption of Christianity these Germanic peoples, whose pagan ideals had kept them chaste for ages, were more flagrantly immoral than the Romans had been.

Lastly, the Teutons, the new masters of Europe and pupils of the Church, in several



places inaugurated a new civilization by blending their old law and ideals with the Roman; and in every single case they had no assistance from the Church, but were hampered and ultimately thwarted by the clergy.

You read of this in the book (No. 1128) where I describe Charlemagne's great effort to restore the Roman school-system and the defeat of it by the Church. A striking earlier instance is the reign of Theodoric, King of the Ostrogoths, in Italy at the end of the fifth century. These "Eastern Goths" had scarcely settled in Italy when they at once, under their enlightened (yet totally uneducated) monarch, settled into peaceful and civilized ways, and restored Italy to its normal condition. The Lombards afterwards showed the same capacity for civilization.

No, the barbarians are not responsible for the Dark Ages. They brought with them an appreciation of law and some high ideals. They required only direction. A strong king such as Theodoric or Charlemagne (both deaf to the clergy) could civilize them in a few years. The Church, which controlled them all, gave them no lead whatever in the direction of civilization. It was not a civilizing force. It was a fairy tale about another world blended with money-loving priestcraft. The Church is deeply and terribly responsible for the Dark Ages, for the suspension of the evolution of civilization for a thousand years. Today there would be—as there will not be in a few centuries more—no war, little or no poverty, no ignorance, no

crime, and infinitely more happiness, if the Christian Church had been a civilizing force.

## II

### THE MORALS OF THE NEW EUROPE

I am in the present book concerned mainly with what we call morals. We have already examined other claims on behalf of the Christian religion. To assert that it was an educational force is, in view of the undisputed historical facts, rather comic; and one is almost equally disposed to smile at the statements that it uplifted woman or freed the slave. These are all convenient fictions of modern manufacture. In spite of its individualist religion the world has come to attach a very serious importance to social idealism. From being uncertain about the existence of a heaven beyond the grave the majority of educated men have now become certain that the only heaven man will ever know is one that he may in time realize on this globe. Hence the discovery of the social usefulness of Christianity. The claim is not now safely made except at a considerable distance from a good public library.

Far older and more confident is the claim that Christianity improved the morals of Europe. This is a quite essential part of the modern Christian position. In the Middle Ages no apologetic claims at all were needed. A note of interrogation was a letter of introduction to the Inquisition. The Scholastic move-

ment in its best days was, it is true, in many respects an apologetic movement—against the learned Moors and Jews of Spain. But all that was claimed was that Christianity was *the truth*; that belief in it was the only way of salvation. Later, however, the Deists arose, and the grand argument ever since has been that Christianity came into a very wicked world and made it very virtuous.

Now that grand argument is piffle. It has no more relation to the historical facts than have the claims we have already examined. It is the reverse of the truth. If you press a religious writer to justify his statement he refers you to the lives of the pretty girl martyrs (all forgeries), to the monks of the desert (a squalid and fanatical development of an old Egyptian idea), to half a dozen young ladies whose virtue St. Jerome praises (while he scourges the vices of all the others and of the clergy), to a saint here and there in the Middle Ages. He never gives a single historical testimony to the general character, either pagan or Christian. But there are such testimonies. You may see them as regards the pagan Greeks and Romans in Little Blue Book No. 1078. Now we shall see them as regards the Christians.

This question of morality is much more than a mere retort to a claim. The Christian apologist, of course, mainly thinks of sex-morals; and we shall see that it is particularly ludicrous to claim that Christianity got Europe to conform to its code of sex-morals. But, taking

the broad view that moral law is social law (see Little Blue Book No. 1061), and that sex-relations also come under that head when injustice or injury are, or may be, involved, it is clearly a very serious test of the value of Christianity to inquire whether it brought more justice, truthfulness, refinement, honor, and decency into Europe.

In other books I tell a little about the immediate effects of the new religion. I quote St. Jerome—to whose letters I have just referred—on the morals of the clergy and most of the laity of the Roman Church, even before the city at large was “converted.” He paints for us a picture of what the preacher calls “immorality” on a quite princely scale. One gathers from his words that the two principal occupations of the priests were philandering and gold-digging. Jerome, who lived in Rome, clearly thinks so. And there is strong confirmation of this low estimate of the average Christian character in the fourth century in the appalling passions roused at elections to the Papal chair itself. One row, we saw, left 160 Christian corpses on the floor of a church; and this was only one incident in a week of bloody faction-fights.

The Christian leaders in other cities give us much the same picture. St. Ambrose has to suppress the “love-feasts” at the tombs of the martyrs in his churches because they are orgies of drunkenness and “love.” St. Cyril of Alexandria paints the vices of his hundred thousand followers in lurid colors. St. Augustine



shows that it was the same in Roman Africa. I have in the previous chapter told how the Vandals had to purify the morals of Carthage, after the great city had been entirely Christian for thirty years.

Roman Catholics get their ideas of Christian morals from fiction like Cardinal Newman's play *Callista* or lives of St. Cyprian. The truth is that the morale of the Christians even in the days of the persecutions was very low. I have in my *St. Augustine and His Age* (p. 247) quoted the official records of a synod of African bishops in the year 305, where the mutual charges of hypocrisy, apostasy, and even murder—of which one bishop almost boasted—are extraordinary. The Roman Church at the time was nearly as bad. In fact, it is impossible to quote any early Christian writer for a general improvement of morals. As Lecky says: "The two centuries after Constantine are uniformly represented by the Fathers as a period of general and scandalous vice."

The recklessness of the modern apologist is humorously exhibited in connection with unnatural vice. Mr. Brace, in what is claimed to be one of the more learned apologetic works (*Gesta Christi*), is not so sure as some are about adultery and fornication, but he is quite clear that Christianity completely eradicated the "unnatural vices" of the pagans, though "they still exist among people outside of Christianity" (p. 299).

I doubt if I ever read a piece of more naive innocence. Pederasty is common today in

every city of the Christian world; it is appallingly common in the most religious districts of Europe such as Greece, Bulgaria, and southern Italy; and there is a very large modern literature from which any serious person can learn all about it. Moreover, the further you go back the worse it was in Christian Europe. I show elsewhere that a hundred years ago it was many times more prevalent in London than it is today. We have no indication whatever that it was more prevalent in pagan days than in Christian days. As to the Middle Ages, we shall see later in this book that it was so common, especially amongst the clergy, that a cardinal of the Church wrote a book which he called *The Book of Gomorrah*. The ignorance of these apologists is monumental.

By the end of the fourth century Christianity was established. The world was now Christian, and I would advise any serious inquirer to find for himself what happened. If he cannot read the original Latin authorities, he has two learned works, which cover the period: the Protestant historian Dean Milman's *History of Latin Christianity* and the *History of European Morals* of Mr. Lecky: a Rationalist, but a man who says all that can justly be said, and much more, in favor of Christianity.

These two historians agree entirely that Europe passed into a state of moral chaos. The Dean is at first disturbed when he approaches the period, and he piously reflects that "the evil was too profoundly seated in the habits of the Roman world to submit to the control

of religion." But Milman was too candid a scholar to maintain that insincere position. The evil was new, not inherited from the pagans, and it grew worse and worse, the world moved farther away from paganism.

For the fifth century our one authority is the priest Salvianus. In a Latin work *On the Providence of God* he very frankly describes the morals of the Christian world in which he lives, and he explicitly says that there has been a very considerable deterioration of morals since pagan days. He writes, for instance (III, 9): "Besides a very few who avoid evil what is almost the whole body of Christians but a sink of iniquity? How many in the Church will you find that are not drunkards or adulterers or fornicators or gamblers or robbers or murderers—or all together?" Rhetorical exaggeration, you will say: we know what these censors of morals are. But if Seneca or some other Stoic had written about the pagans of his time, you would ask me to take it literally. In any case, please understand the situation. You tell me that the morals of Europe improved after the triumph of Christianity, and the *only* authority, a Christian authority, that you can quote as to the general morals of Europe in the fifth century *says precisely the opposite*. The letters of the contemporary Pope Leo I support Salvianus.

Well, you may say, at least Christianity abolished the brutal games of the amphitheater. Does not Lecky say: "There is scarcely any other single reform important in the moral his-

tory of mankind as the suppression of the gladiatorial shows, and this feat must be almost exclusively ascribed to the Christian Church"? It is another lamentable instance of Lecky's habit of presenting bouquets that are not merited. It is quite absurd to magnify the suppression of the games into one of the greatest of moral reforms, and it is wholly misleading to say that "the Christian Church" suppressed them.

From about the year 380 the Church ruled the consciences of the Roman emperors, and got mighty privileges and wealth for itself; but it never suggested to them to suppress the games. No Christian Emperor had the courage or even the inclination to frown on the games as Marcus Aurelius had done. The new generation of Christian Romans had exactly the same passion for these brutal shows as the pagan Romans had had. The Emperor Constantine had given an obscure decree against the games in one province of his empire, and it was never enforced even there. The fanatically Christian Emperor Theodosius, docile to every whisper from the bishops, compelled his prisoners to fight as gladiators.

In the year 404, long after the complete triumph of Christianity, the gladiatorial games were proceeding as usual in the Roman Amphitheater when the monk Telemachus flung himself into the arena to protest. All honor to the monk—he was stoned to death by the *Christian* spectators—but he is not "the Christian Church." Until then the Church had made no



protest, nor do we find any ecclesiastical assembly or prominent ecclesiastic condemning the games, until the end of the seventh century. The combats of man against man were abandoned—of Church pressure there is no trace—but fights with beasts long continued; and Lecky quaintly confesses that “the difficulty of procuring wild animals” had much to do with the abandonment of these. But as the Church of the Middle Ages blessed and smiled upon the almost equally deadly combats of knights, and allowed the duel to survive to modern times, its apologists would do well to talk less about the gladiatorial games.

After the fifth century, the morals of which Salvianus paints in such dark colors, our chief difficulty is that the world became so densely ignorant that very few writers have left us any contemporary description of it. We have, however, one most important and extensive picture in the *History of the Franks* of Bishop Gregory of Tours, covering the sixth century. By this time all civilized Europe was, and had long been, Christian; and to the Christian ideal had been added the Teutonic reverence for chastity. Gregory describes the result in his brutally frank description, and there is probably no darker picture in all literature. Gibbon said long ago, after reading the book, that “it would be difficult to find anywhere more vice or less virtue,” and every later historian agrees with him. Hallam in his *History of the Middle Ages* says that Gregory’s pages show “the extreme wickedness of almost every person concerned in them.” Dean Milman (*History of Latin*

*Christianity*, I, 365), who had at first talked of the evil as inherited from the pagans, but now contemplates Europe after two centuries of Christian influence, says:

It is difficult to conceive a more dark and odious state of society than that of France under her Merovingian kings, the descendants of Clovis, as described by Gregory of Tours. In the conflict of barbarism with Roman Christianity, barbarism has introduced into Christianity all its ferocity, with none of its generosity and magnanimity; its energy shows itself in atrocity of cruelty, and even of sensuality. Christianity has given to barbarism hardly more than its superstition and its hatred of heretics and unbelievers. Throughout assassinations, parricides, and fratricides intermingle with adulteries and rapes.

And the irony of calling these things an inheritance from pagan days is fully exposed when the Protestant historian finds one exception in this dark world of the Christian sixth century: “Under the Ostrogothic kingdom the manners in Italy might seem to revert to the dignified austerity of the old Roman Republic.” In other words, this excellent kingdom of the Eastern Goths in Italy showed that the barbarians *could* easily and rapidly be civilized: that the one man who *did* civilize them, King Theodoric, scorned the Papacy and was generally anti-clerical; and that to find a parallel to morals in his province one has to go back to pagan days!

Surely, my Christian reader will say, there is something wrong, some partiality, about this exposition. How otherwise could the legend that the adoption of Christianity regenerated the world have taken root and flourished so long?

And the honest answer is that the legend took root and flourished in a soil of sheer ignorance. I am *not* selecting the more censorious out of a group of witnesses. We have only Salvianus for the fifth and Gregory for the sixth century, and every historian unhesitatingly follows the priest and the bishop. Lecky gives several pages of summary of Gregory's history, but the words I have quoted from Milman will suffice.

No fouler society was ever described. The women, the Fredegondes and Brunehauts, the successors of the revered types of women of Teutonic paganism, were now viragos of the most shameless and murderous life. Bishops and abbots were as immoral and murderous as the nobles. We read of one bishop's wife who had red-hot irons applied to the sex organs of both her men and women victims, yet we are told that she did other things so much worse that "it is better to be silent about them." The tortures now introduced into Europe were fiendish. Murder was a daily event, the common means to an end—and the end was generally a woman. Bishops had their assassins like other men. And even the "saints" held their tongues when their interest persuaded them. St. Avitus, Bishop of Vienne, congratulated a prince who murdered his three brothers to make his throne secure. Pope St. Gregory the Great himself, whose letters confirm his namesake's picture of society, poured flattery upon the wild and licentious Brunehaut, the living embodiment of vice, and sent the most fulsome congratulations to the eastern emperor Phocas who

usurped the throne after committing six brutal murders.

Whichever way we turn, wherever we can find some chronicle or letter reflecting the morals of that age, we find the same repulsive condition. Let us, for instance, turn to the Eastern Roman Empire, founded by Constantine. This was never overrun by Goths and Vandals, and we shall therefore find in it the influence of Christianity not checked or adulterated by powerful barbarians.

I have just referred to the Emperor Phocas. This man was a vulgar and brutal general in the army who murdered the Emperor Maurice and his five sons and seized the purple. Phocas and his wife Leontia were so repulsive a couple that Constantinople, when it did at last murder its new emperor, exhibited his phallus in the streets on a pole as the most characteristic part of his personality. Yet when Pope Gregory the Great heard of the usurpation of the throne by this couple, he wrote them three letters (XIII, 31, 38, and 39—two of them after an interval of two months, so that he must have known the details—full of such phrases as "Glory be to God on high" and "Let the heavens rejoice and the earth be glad."

The degeneration of Christendom in the east, where it had no contact with barbarians, began early, but it will be enough to recall the story of the wife of its greatest emperor, Justinian, in the first half of the sixth century. This woman, "Theodora of the Brothel," as she was currently called in the city, was one of the



most dissolute young prostitutes in Constantinople, notorious for both natural and unnatural vice, before she was seventeen years old. In my *Empresses of Constantinople* I have carefully examined the evidence, and it is unassailable. We have in recent times recovered and published a work by a Syrian bishop who ate out of her hand, and even he speaks of her as "Theodora of the Brothel." This woman became the wife of the great Justinian, and, while she now found chastity in a palace far more profitable than licentiousness in a theater, her other passions remained unchecked during her long reign. Her imperial life is to me more repugnant, in its blend of piety and ferocity, than the sincere and abandoned gaiety of her teens.

How such a woman could become empress in what was now the greatest city of the world, Constantinople, will be understood by any who can read the (untranslated) works of the contemporary Greek historian Procopius. He depicts Constantinople as quite as vicious as any writer ever depicted Rome. The city, founded by a Christian emperor as a Christian metropolis, reeked with vice from the fourth century onward. The one emperor who tried to reform it, a feeble old man, had his monasteries burned and his palace besieged by the Christian citizens. Indeed, of my two historical works *The Empresses of Rome* (who were pagans) and *The Empresses of Constantinople* (who were all Christians), the latter is far more piquant and picturesque from the viewpoint of sex than the former.

And, in spite of the freedom from barbaric invasions, this Christian Empire was gradually tainted with a spirit of brutality, a habit of torturing and mutilating, that even the worst Roman pagans had not known. Phocas, a repulsive satyr, winning the crown by six murders and earning the blessing of the head of the Church, does not seem an incongruous picture in the history of Constantinople. It is stained a deep red with cruelty, crime, brutality and sordid and unscrupulous ambition. These things are worse than "vice"; but if any think otherwise, they will find that sex-life was as free in the Christian east as it had ever been in Italy.

I may add that the Russian Church and monarchy (on which also I have written a special work, *The Romance of the Romanoffs*) were an historical continuation of the Greek empire, and they maintained the same characteristics down to the nineteenth century: deep piety, clerical subservience, sexual license, frequent brutality, and ruthless exploitation of a profoundly ignorant people. I once pointed out to Professor Milyukoff that the lack of character which I had found in the Romanoffs was reflected in every class of Russian society in the terribly realistic novels of the great Russian writers. He candidly admitted it. The Church had never given moral training. It was the Middle Ages surviving throughout Russian history.

Let me conclude this chapter with a personal explanation. I notice that I have referred to

quite a number of my own historical works, and I would explain that I introduce them, partly because the reader who may have access to them will find fully developed in them, with adequate references to the original authorities, a great deal that I must treat summarily in these Little Blue Books, but mainly that my readers may realize that I have minutely covered a very considerable extent of the historical ground over which we now hurriedly cross. The books are for the most part out of print, so I do not advertise them. But the reader may care to know that in this historical section of my program I am not gleaning facts and sentences from other writers, but generally drawing upon my own research into the contemporary Latin and Greek historians and chronicles.

### III

#### THE IRON AGE

This little excursion into the east will have confirmed what I said in the first chapter, that the inroad of the barbarians is not the sole or chief cause of the degradation of civilization after the fall of Rome and the triumph of Christianity. We may now return to Europe and trace the further course of the degeneration.

We have seen that the only contemporary Christian authorities for the fifth and sixth centuries place the degeneration of morals beyond any possible controversy. If this situation

had been due, as Milman at first suggests, to evils inherited from the pagan world, we should at least expect some improvement under Christian influence instead of actual deterioration. If, on the other hand, we lay the stress on the barbaric invasions, we shall expect that at least after a century or two—though it took Theodoric and Charlemagne only a decade or two to civilize their people on secular principles—European morals will show a return to sobriety.

We find precisely the reverse. Europe sank steadily into the deepest and foulest bog of the Dark Ages, the tenth century, which historians call the Iron Age: largely, one imagines, on account of the appallingly free use of the knife and the sword.

For the seventh, eighth, and ninth centuries we have a very scanty literature. Gregory of Tours, who throws such lurid light on the fifth and sixth centuries, died in 594. For the next half century we have only a very thin and meager monkish chronicle, which tells the same dark story, and then there is not a scrap of reliable history for a hundred years. Europe was sunk in the crassest ignorance and superstition. Our only indications of the moral condition are Papal documents (written in such barbarous Latin that one can scarcely read them), acts of councils, letters of bishops, and scraps of monastic chronicles. These all tell a consistent story. Take the letters to Rome from Germany of St. Boniface. He writes to the Pope (*ep. xlix*): "Today for the most part in our episcopal cities the seats are assigned to greedy laymen or adulterous clerics or wenchers, to enjoy the



material benefits of them." All the contemporary information we have tells the same story of gluttonous, drunken, and corrupt clergy and monks, of murders and mutilations, of a densely ignorant and coarse population.

And just here the reader will find a useful illustration of the two ways of writing history, the Catholic and the historical. The seventh century, the most ignorant and one of the grossest of all, has supplied more than eight hundred saints to the Roman calendar! Writing the life of one of these, Cardinal Pitra says:

The finest title of the seventh century to vindication is the great number of saints it produced—no other century was so glorified except the age of the martyrs, the number of whom is known to God alone. Each year has its harvest, each day its group. . . . If, then, it pleases God and Christ to scatter these splendors of the saints so bountifully upon a century, what does it matter that history and human glory think so little of it?

That is, of course, all that the Catholic reads about the early Middle Ages. On these eight hundred "self-tormentors" of a century which is too gross to write its own history he bases his claim that Christianity purified the world.

But if we have no work adequately reflecting the life of the clergy and the people in this seventh century, we have ample evidence (in Gregory of Tours and the letters of Gregory the Great) that it opened with as dark, violent, and vicious a population as had ever existed in Europe: we have the chronicle of Fredigarius extending that picture as far as 642; and, when the literary blank ends in the eighth century, we find Christendom in exactly the same con-

dition of universal vice and violence. It is grimly significant that the chair of Peter itself was filled by no less than twenty-one Popes in succession in the one hundred years after the death of Gregory. What we shall presently see will throw light on that.

About the middle of the eighth century the father of Charlemagne, Pippin, a court-official, usurped the French throne, with the blessing of the Papacy, and was summoned to Italy to pay the price. This was that he should drive the Lombards out of a large part of Italy and hand it over to the Pope. Pope Stephen II actually forged a letter in the name of St. Peter, to work upon the feelings of the credulous monarch. In another book (*Little Blue Book No. 1107*) I show that nearly all the legends of the martyrs were forged at this period, and Rome was rising to something more ambitious in the way of forgery.

What the character of the Papacy already was, and how little it was likely to "reform Europe," we are told quite plainly in the official *Book of the Popes*. The papal election of 767 A. D. was accompanied by a murderous struggle, and the successful candidate, Stephen IV, "caused the eyes of Christopher and Sergius to be put out," calmly writes the papal historian. Christopher and Sergius were his chief officials and supporters, and common intrigue and bribery turned the Pope against them.

The next Pope, Hadrian I, was a pious and virtuous man, yet he is the Pope who induced Charlemagne to found the Papal States by producing two of the most notorious and most

shameless forgeries ever perpetrated: the "Acts of St. Sylvester" and "The Donation of Constantine." These documents, which mendaciously represented the Emperor Constantine as giving most of Italy to the Papacy, were fabricated in Rome in the eighth century and were used by the Popes. And this pious and virtuous Pope, who used forgeries, also promoted his nephews to high office: men so brutal in character that in 799 they dragged Pope Leo from his horse and attempted to cut out his eyes and tongue, so that one of them could take his place. The Pope himself was accused of adultery. His successor Paschal I had two of his officials beheaded, after their eyes had been cut out. And this beautiful century was rounded by the fabrication of "The Forged Decretals," which completed the massive foundation of lies on which the power of the Popes was raised. We shall return to these presently.

In a word, corruption was eating deeper and deeper into the very heart of Christendom, and the state of every country in Europe was, naturally, worse than that of its one metropolis, Rome. In 867 there had been another orgy of murder, mutilation and rape round the papal palace. But a description of its condition during the tenth century, the lowest point of European degradation, will dispense us from going into detail as regards the earlier centuries.

In the year 896 there was witnessed in Rome a scene which fitly inaugurated one hundred and fifty years of such degradation as has

never fallen upon any other religious organization in history. Stephen VI became Pope, after a bloody contest of the various factions. He ordered the body of one of his predecessors, Formosus, who had been several weeks buried, to be brought to the papal palace. The stinking corpse was clothed in the pontifical garments and propped in the throne. The august representative of Christ and the Holy Ghost, the channel of God's mercy to the human race, gathered his "cardinals" (the name was already in use) and bishops round the ghastly object, and they vented upon it a fury such as one would hardly expect savages to show to a corpse. In the end they cut three fingers from the right hand of the putrid body, and flung it into the Tiber.

If paganism, if any pagan civilization, can show the remotest parallel to that trial of the corpse of Pope Formosus, it has, apparently, not yet been discovered by any Catholic apologist. Here, moreover, we have the highest and most official representatives of what was understood to be the highest thing in Christendom, quite openly and officially perpetrating this orgy of barbarism. If that was Rome and the Papacy at the end of the ninth century, what was likely to be the condition of Europe in general?

And it was only the beginning. In the very next year Pope Stephen quarreled with his own supporters. They thrust him into a dungeon and strangled him. Six Popes succeeded each other in the next eight years, and, while history has no record of the end of most of them,



we can surmise it. In 904 the most turbulent of all the fighting bishops cut his way, literally, to the chair of Peter, and the "Church of God," as the Catholic calls it, became for thirty years a Pornocracy, or "government by whores." My Catholic reader will shrink from the word, but it is from the most respected and most learned of Catholic historians that I borrow it.

Cardinal Baronius, who uses it placidly, notes in his *Annals*, at the year 912, that Pope Sergius III, who had been the moving spirit in the trial of the body of Formosus and had murdered two Popes at least to get the "holy see" for himself, was the lover of "that most powerful, most noble, and most shameless whore, Theodora." Father Pagi, Mansi, the Benedictine editors of the Pope's letters, and even recent Catholic writers like Mgr. Duchesne and Canon W. Barry (*The Papal Monarchy*) admit that the evidence is irresistible; and I have shown in my *Crises in the History of the Papacy* that the difficulties raised by one or two more recent Catholic writers are frivolous.

Theodora, wife of one of the highest nobles of Rome, was of such loose morals that the chief writers of her time call her "a whore," and two Popes, Sergius III and John X, were amongst her lovers. Her equally beautiful and equally unscrupulous daughter Marozia also is called "a whore," and Pope Sergius III was so notoriously the lover of the daughter as well as of the mother that the *Pontifical Book* itself, the official papal chronicle, describes Pope John XI as "son of Sergius III" (by Marozia).

These "whores" governed the Papacy and Rome for thirty years. Our chief source of information about them is the contemporary Bishop Liutprand, whose outspoken statements are sufficiently supported by two monkish chroniclers and the official papal calendar.

For more than one hundred and fifty years, from 890 to 1045, the Papacy and Rome were now, with rare and short intervals, enlivened by every variety of crime and vice. Murder and mutilation were common. Chastity was so rare, as a Catholic writer said, with fine irony, that it came to be called "the angelic virtue." During the last 150 years there have been *ten* Popes: during that bloody 150 years of the Iron age no less than *forty* Popes succeeded each other on the scarlet throne!

John X, lover of Theodora, came to quarrel with her fiery daughter Marozia. He was imprisoned and stifled with his pillow in 928. Three years later Marozia put her own illegitimate son (by Pope Sergius), John XI, in the "holy see," but he had in a few years to fly for his life. In 955 the powerful noble Alberic put his illegitimate son, John XII, on the papal throne, and the youth adorned it with every known vice for nine years, until a betrayed husband murdered him and ended his adulteries. Later the Count of Tusculum put two of his sons, successively, in the chair, and they fully sustained its reputation. In the end a grandson of the Count, Benedict IX, got the tiara, and he passed the high-water mark of the vices of his predecessors. Not for the last time the "sacred palace" witnessed unnatural,

as well as every variety of natural, vice, in addition to murder and all other known crimes. It is a succeeding Pope who tells us this.

Such had the Papacy become seven centuries after Christianity had been forced upon a reluctant Europe. It is hardly necessary to say that Christendom at large was in the same condition of vice and violence. Theodora and Marozia are fit representatives of the new womanhood which the Church had "uplifted." The latest and most desperate apologist for the Papacy, Father Mann, thinks that he can more or less clear his Popes by casting all blame upon the nobility of Rome. "Their swinish lust," he says, "was only second to their cruelty and avarice." He does not explain how, whereas Christianity had "converted" Europe, these entirely licentious and unscrupulous nobles had come to replace the generation of gentlemen, like Symmachus and Praetextatus, who had been the last representatives of paganism in the fourth century.

Rome was more generally corrupt than it had been in the days of the insane Nero or the feeble-minded Elagabal; and this corruption was intimately connected with the general illiteracy. It is on record that at this time some of these members of the highest Roman nobility could not write their own names: how many *could* we do not know. It is useless to ask us to consider these vices as relics of paganism, when we know that from being a generally literate city, and in its higher class a very refined and cultivated city, Rome under the

Popes had sunk to an illiteracy that has no parallel elsewhere in the history of civilization.

We have three specific documents which show that this degradation during the Iron Age was not peculiar to the clergy and nobility of Rome. The contemporary Bishop of Verona, RATHERIUS, was one of the few prelates who were genuinely religious, and in his *Praeloquia* he has left us a lugubrious but fascinating picture of the life of most of his colleagues. I may quote the summary of it which I gave in my *Crises*:

They [the bishops] rush through their mass in the morning, don gorgeous dresses and gold belts, and ride out on horses with golden bridles; they return at night to rich banquets, with massive goblets of good wine, and dancing girls for company, and dice to follow; and they retire, too often with their companions, to beds that are inlaid with gold and silver and spread with covers and pillows of silk.

Europe had become appallingly poor, but the Church drew from the impoverished millions, the labors of the serfs, so splendid a revenue that the most vicious intrigued and murdered each other to become abbots, bishops and popes. Bishop Atto of Vercelli in one of his letters (IX) shows us that the common priests were equally sunk in sensuality and, though they still married, prone to adultery. And the minutes of the Council of Trosle in 909 (Mansi collection, XVIII, 263) confirm both pictures.

The older Catholic historians, who were at least honest, very candidly describe this general condition of Christendom. Where was Christ? They remind us how he had slept in



Peter's boat during a storm on the Sea of Galilee. Once more, they say, he slept in "the barque of Peter," as it tossed on those dark waves of the Iron Age. A long slumber; and we have two further long periods of the degradation of the Papacy to consider later.

The history of European morals has still to be written. Lecky's work is not a systematic chronological exposition, and it ends with the appearance of Charlemagne. But in this and other books I give sufficient evidence for the reader to form an opinion; and I show that all the great historians agree in that opinion. Pagan Greece and Rome had been comparable with ourselves in character and conduct. With the triumph of Christianity and the fall of Rome, Europe sank steadily age by age until it reached the unprecedented degradation of the Iron Age.

#### IV

#### THE GENTLE ARTS OF FORGERY AND MURDER

I have several times referred the reader, for further details and for the original authorities, to a book of mine entitled *Crises in the History of the Papacy*. This work was the outcome of a conversation with my friend and publisher, Mr. G. H. Putnam. Together we designed a history of the Papacy in the form of a series of careful and impartial character-studies of twenty of the greatest Popes. Based upon the original authorities, it was to meet exacting tests of scholarship, and it was to be

dispassionate both in selection of Popes and in treatment.

I quickly realized that there were not twenty "great" Popes in the entire series. It was necessary to think of "famous" or "notorious" Popes, or men who were characteristic. And I further found that the proportion of Popes whose lives and characters might insure the sympathy of the reader was much smaller than Mr. Putnam, one of the least aggressive of men, hoped. For my present purpose, I need say only that for the whole medieval period of eleven centuries I found only *six* Popes who could in any sense be called great: that is to say, men as strictly virtuous as their creed demanded and at the same time endowed with high ability or commanding personality.

These men—we will discuss the Popes of the Renaissance later—were Leo I, Gregory I, Hadrian I, Nicholas I, Gregory VII, and Innocent III. And it further became apparent that even in the case of these saintly Popes, who seem to have been really indifferent to women, there were dark shades which alienate the respect of the modern reader. It is possible to generalize and say that they all acted on the principle that the end justifies the means, and some of the most saintly of them expressly approved the principle. It was on that principle that St. Augustine had come to favor the coercion and persecution of non-Christians and heretics. On it is based the bloody intolerance which smears the whole history of Christendom; and on it also is based the use of forgeries to an extent without parallel in

history. To the modern mind these things are far worse than the amours of monks, nuns, and bishops, and they must be considered.

Leo I sent his legates to the Council of Chalcedon in 450 with a forged or falsified version of the sixth canon of the Council of Nicaea, in order to force recognition of his supremacy, and he sent spurious copies of the decisions of the eastern bishops to the bishops of Gaul. It was, moreover, in the fifth century that Rome began on a large scale the forgery of lives of martyrs which I described in another book (Little Blue Book No. 1107). Relics of martyrs were now being "discovered" in great numbers to meet the pious demand of ignorant Christendom, and legends were fabricated by the thousands to authenticate the spurious bits of bone.

Gregory I, the next great Pope, and certainly a great character, was not more scrupulous in some of his acts. I have told how he poured nauseous flattery on the murderous and obscene Phocas, because it suited the interest of the papacy, how he was equally obsequious to the Messalina of the early middle ages, Brunehaut (or Brunichildis), and how he contrived to make his real belief in the approaching end of the world yield the papacy about 1,800 square miles of land and a revenue of about \$2,000,000. He used bribes, threats and all kinds of stratagems to attain his ends.

Hadrian I, nearly two centuries later, is the next Pope who can by any stretch of generosity be called great and good. But it is precisely during the pontificate of Hadrian that

Roman clerks forged the two most remarkable and most profitable documents that were ever fabricated. The "temporal power" of the Popes is almost entirely based on these two forgeries. They (*The Acts of St. Sylvester* and *The Donation of Constantine*) represented that when Constantine left Rome to found his eastern empire, he handed over the greater part of Italy to the Papacy. Charlemagne was expressly induced by these forgeries to win the Italian territory for the Popes, and the official calendar or *Pontifical Book*, a chronicle written age by age in the papal chancellory itself, describes this "donation" in connection with Hadrian. The forgery is now universally recognized, yet it was unknown before Hadrian, and it is used by him in his letters as well as his personal negotiations with Charlemagne. Nearly the whole life of the pious Hadrian was devoted to securing, by bloodshed, the lands mentioned in the forgeries.

Nicholas I was the next notable Pope; and the third greatest forgery of history, the third basis of papal power, appeared in his time and was used by him. Many of my readers will have read *Teeftallow* and will remember the amusing, and vitally true, passage in which the free-living Beavers refuses to play baseball on Sunday: "By God, I'm not that bad, Abner. I know I'm goin' to hell, but damn my riggin' if I'll go out and play ball open on Sunday!" I have known more than one such case of profanity shot with a streak of piety. So the thoroughly sensual abbots and bishops of the early Middle Ages—the letters of Nichol-



as reflect their morals very faithfully—were not prepared to resist the papal power if it had a doctrinal basis. I prove in another book that it had no doctrinal basis whatever, and was not in the least recognized in the Church before the middle of the fifth century. Europe had, however, now sunk to such a pitch of ignorance, and the art of forgery was so advanced that the defect was easily remedied. Some time in the ninth century there appeared a collection, now known as *The Forged Decretals*, of falsified and spurious canons and decrees of the early Church which provided the missing basis of papal power.

We do not say that the Popes fabricated this collection, but Nicholas and other Popes certainly used it in asserting their authority; and Nicholas, who had able bishop-opponents, used it so sparingly that he seems to have been aware of the forgery. In any case, we have so far a record of forgery in the interest of the Church which resembles nothing else in history.

And it is precisely the next great Pope and saint, Gregory VII and Hildebrand, who extended papal power on the strength of these and other forgeries. The famous German historian, Dollinger, has shown in detail (*Das Papstthum*, II, art. 2) that Gregory's chief workers, Bishop Anselm, Bishop Bonitho and Cardinal Deusdedit, were unscrupulous in the use of historical and canonical documents and that Gregory uses their new falsifications as well as the older forgeries.

The Catholic who has been reared on a quite untruthful literature about the Pope has a feeling of outrage when one says these things about his spiritual heroes, but they are matters of ordinary history. Even an orthodox historian of the papacy, F. Roquain (*La papauté au moyen âge*) admits that Gregory was "not entirely exempt from reproach in the use of means to attain his ends" (p. 127) and was guilty of "excesses unworthy of his great soul" (p. 131). He was, in fact, quite unscrupulous in attaining the ends of his Church. He had a frightful temper, and on the least provocation he turned the army of one country against another. In one of the most famous of his letters (VIII, 21) he materially distorts a passage which he professes to quote from Pope Gelasius, and in another (IX, 2) he too leniently says that "even a lie that is told for a good purpose, in the cause of peace, is not wholly free from blame." He was in the end driven from Rome by the Romans themselves because, for his own purposes, he had brought upon them the semi-barbaric Normans.

Gregory was above all things a puritan, probably as much from physical as from spiritual reasons, and he set himself to purify the sexual morals of Rome and Europe. On the character of the mass of the people he made no impression, and, while he for a time checked the luxurious and sensual prelates and abbots, his chief campaign did much in one sense to increase the degradation of Europe. He insisted on the celibacy of the clergy.

Although this lamentable ideal had been

pressed in the early centuries of the Church, there was no absolute law, and Gregory found that priests were quite commonly married and leading normal lives. They paid little heed to the new papal fulminations, but the Pope let loose upon them an army of monks and "paid agitators," loading them with abuse, representing their wives as whores, turning their people against them, and, where they still proved refractory, laying cudgels on them. In the end the law of the celibacy of the clergy was firmly established; and it is mainly from that date that we have the repulsive spectacle in religious history of hundreds of thousands of priests and monks making solemn vows of chastity yet indulging their sex-feelings like other men. We will return later to this.

The last great Pope of the Middle Ages, the sixth in a thousand years (and two or three of the sixth would not have distinguished themselves in any other capacity) was Innocent III; a man as deeply religious as any that ever sat on the throne of Peter. We now reach the thirteenth century, which is understood to be the flower of the Middle Ages; but I will here confine myself to the two vices which I have included in the title of this chapter.

There was no need of further forgeries. Now securely established on its basis of forged lives of saints and martyrs, forged donations of temporal power and territory, and forged decretals stating its spiritual powers, the Papacy was so strong and prosperous that the Popes actually dreamed of forming a kind of United States of Europe with themselves as

virtual Presidents. Nearly every country was in some ingenious way made out to be a fief of the Papacy and bound to recognize the Pope as its feudal monarch. And in his attempts to realize this ideal Innocent III, perhaps the greatest of the Popes, and certainly one of the most Christian, acted as much as his saintly predecessor Gregory VII had done on the maxim that the end justifies the means.

He accepted the guardianship of the young prince Frederic of Sicily, the future Frederic Barbarossa, exacting from the feeble and pious mother that the kingdom should become a fief of the Papacy; and even after this he encouraged a French adventurer, who seemed more promising, to invade it. He favored the absolutely baseless claim of Otto of Brunswick to the German throne because of the promises of that unscrupulous adventurer. He maintained the most friendly relations with King John of England after that royal blackguard had murdered his nephew and seduced a French lady; but he laid England under an interdict when the king refused to receive a bishop imposed by the Pope, he urged the French to invade the country on the ground that it was a rebellious fief of the Papacy, and, when John humbly acknowledged that the king of England was a vassal of the Popes, Innocent sided with him in his tyranny, denounced the Magna Charta as "devil-inspired," and excommunicated the barons for compelling the king to sign it.

It was the same in every country, but the most shocking example of this papal tendency



to assume that the end justifies the means I discovered in one of Innocent's letters (XI, 232). This letter deliberately instructs his legate who was dealing with Raymond of Toulouse to "deceive him by prudent dissimulation" and lead him on treacherously to his ruin. This sentiment seems incredible, but no writer has ever questioned, or could question, the authenticity of the letter.

And this reference to Raymond of Toulouse fitly introduces the second theme of this chapter: the appalling volume of bloodshed which disgraced Christendom. Raymond of Toulouse was the prince of the Albigensians, a very numerous and high-minded body of dissenters from Christianity in the south of France in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. When Papal legates failed to convince them of the sanctity of the papacy and the sublimity of the medieval Christian faith, Pope Innocent drew a vast army of military adventurers upon them—a "crusade," he called it, though he knew well that the aim of the soldiers was loot—and drowned hundreds of thousands of men, women and children in their own blood. This was the starting point of the Inquisition, but it was also a normal, though portentously large, episode in the orgy of bloodshed that had come upon Europe.

We saw that this began in the fifth century: in fact, we may trace it to the fourth century, when tens of thousands of Arian, Trinitarian and Donatist Christians slew each other, and hundreds of orthodox Roman Christians were slaughtered in their own churches in the fights

for the "holy see." From the very beginning of the fifth century knives and axes moved with terrible facility, both at Rome and Constantinople. Stilicho, the greatest defender of the Empire, was assassinated, and his widow was afterwards condemned to be strangled. The Emperor Honorius fell in love with his own sister, whose husband was murdered and the palace at Ravenna was reddened with blood. A princess of seventeen fled to a nunnery, pregnant from one of her own chamberlains, and from the nunnery presently fled to offer her love to the king of the Huns. The Emperor Valentinian murdered his chief minister with his own hand, and two years later he was himself murdered for raping a noble Roman lady. The assassin soon got rid of his own wife, and married the widow of the emperor, and she in turn invited the Vandals of Rome to murder him.

This is the chronicle of the Christian imperial family during the few decades after the fall of Rome, the most terrible catastrophe in ancient history, had added its sobering influence to the precepts of the new religion. The western Empire was abolished, though the eastern fully sustained the new tradition of murder, mutilation and outrage. Europe sank into the condition which, on the testimony of Gregory of Tours, I have described in the second chapter. Murder and mutilation appear on every page of the chronicle. What the violence was amongst the mass of the people, now very imperfectly governed by law, we can imagine.

I have previously described the state of Rome itself during the eighth, ninth and tenth centuries. At the command of the Popes or future Popes eyes were cut out of their sockets and assassins plied their trade with terrible profit. The papal chair itself was now, owing to the shrewd acquisitions of Gregory the Great and the fraudulent pretensions of Hadrian I, the richest throne in Christendom, and decade after decade blood was shed by rival aspirants to it and by their factions. The nobles themselves were, we saw, entirely wanting in scruple or restraint, and their swords, or the daggers of their followers, were the ordinary means of solving a problem. As to the common folk of Europe, who were overwhelmingly serfs with no hope of justice against their "betters," acquiescence in every act of injustice or brutality was their only way of escape from the lash, the instrument of torture or the sword.

The administration of justice, which had been the pride of the Roman Empire, now became a nightmare of superstitious and callous brutality. Let me give one illustration, from a medieval chronicle from which I took notes many years ago.

The abbot-chronicler, of the twelfth century tells us that some of the treasures of the cathedral of Laon were stolen, and a goldsmith who was detected disposing of the loot, at once denounced one of the canons of the cathedral as the thief. The canon, as law permitted, challenged the goldsmith to an "ordeal by duel" and killed him. The canon then re-

turned to his burglaries, overreached himself, and had the impudence to steal a golden vessel containing some of the milk and a lock of hair of the Virgin Mary. It was proposed by most of the learned theologians of the town that a baby from every house should be subjected to the "trial by drowning," so as to discover the guilty house. . .

In short—for it is a long and wonderful story—the seven clerical treasurers underwrote the ordeal, and the guilty canon failed to pass it. He was, in the prison vaults, stripped of his clothes, and the jailers poured boiling fat over him; and the monastic chronicler, a contemporary and a man of Laon, says with surprise that they elicited from the man of God, instead of a confession, "an infinite torrent of imprecations." They then hung him up by the arms, a weight being tied to his feet, and he was after a time refreshed with another bath of boiling fat. These alternate recreations lasted some hours, each being applied *ten* times. In the end the robust priest-burglar got the promise of an enormous sum of money out of them before he would disclose the hidden treasure. He exacted also a solemn oath that he would be released; but the bishop, once he had recovered the treasures, kept the money and hanged his remarkable canon.

The brutality of life in those days was incredible. To extract confessions, hot eggs were put under a prisoner's armpits; his feet were dipped in salt water and then licked by goats; he would lie on the ground while water



dripped, drop by drop, from a great height upon his naked stomach. Then there were racks, thumb-screws and all kinds of fiendish mechanisms. The European mind had become so gross and callous that even the most exalted saints and the most sensitive scholars made no protest against these horrors which filled Europe with groans and curses for a thousand years.

In such a world the principle of religious coercion which the Church had established the moment it had power to apply it became the ghastly system which stifled thought and culminated in the murder of witches and the Inquisition. To these I devote two special books, for modern research has intensified the horror of the witch-massacres in discovering that they were merely heretics, of both sexes and all ages, and has shown us the Inquisition as a sordid scramble for gold over the bodies of murdered men. But there are other aspects of this incredible coarseness and savagery of life in the Middle Ages and we will complete the picture of it in the next chapter.

## V

### THE BLIGHT OF LIFE

By the twelfth century Europe was slightly reducing its ignorance. "The Church had given it schools," the apologist says; which really means that the few schools which a few bishops (not the Church) gave it had been expanded by the rising tide of the secular life of the time. Civic and economic develop-

ment was beginning to re-civilize Europe. Exactly, says my friend the apologist. At last the Church had mastered the chaos which the barbarians had caused, and law, order, education, art, civic life, guilds . . . oh, everything good was springing up under its beneficent influence.

I show in another book what this increase of education and literacy really meant. *Probably ninety-nine percent of Europe was still illiterate.* Ninety-nine? Yes. It is quite clear that in the earlier centuries, when the richest nobles of Rome could not write their names, and the clerks of the Papal chancery wrote Latin as some poor Italian immigrant to America would write English today, not one in a thousand could read and write. After carefully considering what evidence there is, I should say that the "great" educational movement of the middle Middle Ages reduced the illiteracy of Europe, for which the Church was responsible, from 99.9 to about 99 per cent.

But the slight movement did mean that Christendom had now more chroniclers—of historians we cannot speak—and they will tell us all about this beautiful life of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. I have just quoted a story of a burglar-canon from a twelfth-century chronicler. Rather, there are two monkish chroniclers of the time who tell it and give us a naive picture of contemporary life. Let us take a little more from them.

The bishop seems to have been practically the mayor of the city of Laon; an important town, as it was Anglo-French and fairly

wealthy. He ordered the torture of prisoners and sanctioned duels and ordeals. As we saw, when his appalling tortures could not induce the canon to say where he had hidden the treasures, he promised him on oath forty pounds of gold and his freedom—and then hanged him. The Virgin directed him in a dream to do this, he said. The Virgin often directed him to do things which were peculiarly at variance with the supposed principles of her son. Some years earlier the Queen of England had given him a piece of cloth of gold to present to the Queen of France, and the Virgin had directed him to give it to herself—in short, to make of it a fine vestment for himself. As mayor he debased the coinage and ruined hundreds. He flew about the country lance in hand, and, the chroniclers say, the curses of the poor followed him.

Such were bishops; for he was a common type. Naturally, nobles and common clergy, much less the people, could not be expected to know the niceties of the Sermon on the Mount better than their bishop. The lords spread cutthroats over the abominable roads of the country and robbed every merchant. Even the prelates and abbots were thus robbed if their armed retinue was not strong enough. In some places the monks of a large and poor monastery helped their table and wine-cellar by the same means. Independent bravos, playing a lone hand, filled up the gaps of the system.

The network of brigands spread all over Europe as far as the door of St. Peter's Church in Rome, and inside the church the work was

taken up by a special type of blackguard. One of the lieutenants of Pope Gregory VII, Bishop Bonitho, (*Ad Amicum*, VII), tells us that when his hero came to the papal throne, he found a very peculiar "old custom" in St Peter's. About sixty men, wearing mitres, prowled about the church and preyed on the pilgrims. They called themselves cardinals, though they were laymen (licensed by the Popes), and took money for their prayers. All had either wives or mistresses, yet they haunted the church by night as well as day, for women pilgrims slept in it, and they raped or seduced them. It was a saying of the time that few women returned from the pilgrimage to Rome as virtuous as they had set out.

However, to return to these local chronicles—which are faithful mirrors of medieval life and thought—thieving and robbery with violence were universal. The king's horses were often stolen; though everybody knew there was "something with boiling oil in it" for a man who stole from a king or a church. The very poorest were robbed of their few cents. A common trick on fair-day at Laon, the chroniclers say, was to ask rustics into the house to see the goods. They found a little grain or fruit at the bottom of a large chest and, as they leaned over to examine it, they were tipped in and fastened down until they paid a modest ransom.

So even the poor rustic had to go warily, or he would have no money left for the church; and how could he hope to see or kiss the august relics without giving alms? At Laon



the chief treasures were, as I said, some milk and hair of the Virgin Mary. There was a crystal lid to the golden case and you could—for a consideration—see the precious whitish fluid and the hair with your own eyes. This was Laon's set-off to the rival attraction at Soissons, a neighboring town, which had secured one of the milk-teeth shed by the infant Jesus.

There seems to have been enough milk of the Virgin—some of it was still exhibited in Spanish churches in the nineteenth century—preserved in Europe to feed a few calves. There was hair enough to make a mattress. There were sufficient pieces of "the true cross" to make a boat. There were teeth of Christ enough to outfit a dentist (one monastery, at Charroux, had the complete set.) There were so many sets of baby-linen of the infant Jesus, in Italy, France and Spain, that one could have opened a shop with them. One of the greatest churches in Rome had Christ's manger-cradle. Seven churches had his authentic umbilical cord, and a number of churches had his foreskin (removed at circumcision and kept as a souvenir by Mary.) One church had the miraculous imprint of his little bottom on a stone on which he had sat. Mary herself had left enough wedding rings, shoes, stockings, shirts, girdles, etc., to fill a museum. You can, if you are good, see one of her shifts still in Chartres cathedral; though in this coarser age of ours it is called a "veil." One church had Aaron's rod. Six churches had the six heads cut off John the Baptist. . . .

Every one of these things was, remember, in its origin, a cynical, blasphemous swindle; and Rome was the great trading center. All the wriggling of all the G. K. Chestertons and all the Jesuits and Paulists in America will not obscure that. Each of those objects was at first launched upon the world with deliberate mendacity. Honor and honesty were as rare as chastity in Christianized Europe and as rare in the Church as in the "world." To talk of those ages as "spiritual" and ours as "materialistic." . . . One is almost disposed to ask for an application to the clergy of the law about obtaining money under false pretenses.

Europe was again accumulating wealth, but its unequal distribution in our day is temperate in comparison with the Middle Ages. We saw how luxurious the bishops were even in the impoverished tenth century. Look at the Pope, they would have said, if you had surprised them by talking about morals. Pope John XII was officially proved to have "turned the Lateran palace into a brothel," fornicated with his two sisters, castrated his critics, raped girls who came to pray in St. Peter's, gambled, cursed freely, and drunk the health of the devil. Later John XXIII would be officially proved. . . . We will see that later.

The overwhelming majority of the population of Christendom were serfs. One must bear in mind always that there was in those ages nothing remotely like the industrial population of modern times. Craftsmen were few. Home-labor supplied most of a family's wants, and they were very modest. There are no statistics,

of course, but I would hazard the statement that about ninety percent of the people of Christendom were serfs.

It is by these that we must judge the Middle Ages; not by the nobles (unscrupulous exploiters, most of them), or velvet-clad burghers and merchants, or even the gildsmen. And their life was horrible. The most optimistic of expert works on them is Harold Rogers' *Six Centuries of Work and Wages*, but I have shown from his own learned pages that the life of the enormous mass of the people was filthy, miserable, and vile. He rightly speaks of "the inconceivably filthy habits of the people" and their "very few holidays." They worked, from dawn to sunset, on three hundred and eight days a year. Their meat was salt—and the salt was poisonous—during half the year. Their hovels were bare, dismal disease-breeding kennels. Their daughters, or plump young wives, were free to any abbot or lord or servant of such. They were tied to the soil, in monotonous small villages, and had to risk their lives at any moment in the lord's quarrels or the king's wars.

Disease caused such suffering and death as we cannot imagine. In war a man's wounds commonly mortified. If he were a knight, he might (down to the sixteenth century) have his leg crudely sawn off, without an anesthetic, and hot pitch put on it to staunch the blood. No one knew a vein from an artery. But surgery and medicine were so crude that it was just as well to be too poor to employ them. I have before me a learned German work on

medicine and surgery in the Middle Ages, and it is enough of itself to justify the title of this chapter.

There were not three million people in England during the beautiful thirteenth century, and it took four centuries for this population to double. With modern conditions of health a population, not restrained by birth-control, would double in much less than fifty years. The carnage in the ages of faith was appalling, and the suffering of those who survived was beyond our comprehension. One epidemic, the Black Death, killed 25,000,000 in two years. Such epidemics swept mercilessly from one end to the other of helpless Europe. Naturally, at the end of such a pestilence of famine, labor was scarce and was better paid—those are the periods which the optimist quotes—which meant more money for the church, the lords, the brigands, and the quacks and impostors and exploiters generally.

That was the wonderful thirteenth century, the flower of the Middle Ages. Try to picture to yourself the life of nine people out of ten in Christendom at that time. Cut out those pictures of occasional saints or scholars, of silk-robed merchants and gay tournaments. Follow the life of the man working from dawn to sunset, then returning to a sty, the floor unpaved, the cess-pool and mud heap at the door. The filthy interior without the cheapest comfort or adornment. Imagine the woman bearing her seven or eight children in it, doing twice the work of the poorest modern woman, brutally treated by most husbands, a cow. . . .



And the same gossip and crassly superstitious little village round her from cradle to grave, the scold's bridle or the ducking stool if she dare assert herself, the suspicion of witchcraft is she wondered if the gentle Jesus did really arrange all this, the sudden departure of the man for war, the famine drawing on with fiendish slowness, the plague spreading over the countryside.

Hurry up, ladies. Subscribe to one or other of these numerous campaigns to compel us to return to the age of faith. Applaud these half-educated or totally uneducated preachers who come along and denounce science and the modern spirit. But for God's sake, don't read history. It would unsettle your convictions.

## VI

### MONKS AND NUNS AND OTHER THINGS

There is one redeeming feature about that fearful stretch of history which we call the Middle Ages, the thousand-year rule of Roman Christianity. No, I do not mean its art. Another book considers that (*Little Blue Book No. 1136*). I mean its unbounded immorality. Sex-pleasure is cheap; in those days nobody minded bastards, so that even the woman did not pay. The one way in which that dismal world could revenge itself upon its Church and its pervading misery was to indulge the thrill of sex. And it did, like goats.

One's satisfaction at the thought that these hundreds of millions of our predecessors were not entirely joyless in their lives is, however,

checked by several considerations. The first is that their sexual license was no deliberate and open-eyed control of their own lives, but the outcome of a general brutalization which kept back civilization. Those who could afford it were as drunken as they were immoral and as gluttonous as they were drunken. It is a myth, now exploded, that men were stronger in those days. But they had at least the digestion of cattle—and for the same reason, immunity from thought—and they gorged. Possibly we are paying the bill.

Secondly, this general sexual indulgence was a flat defiance of their beliefs. The psychology of this is not very obscure. The Church was very far indeed from the days when it had taught that there was no forgiveness for mortal sin. You could get forgiveness, a clean slate, in many ways. There was a priest at every turn—there were in England 30,000 priests to 3,000,000 people—a monkery every few miles, all the blessed relics, and so on. The Church, it is true, soon realized that it was making pardon too cheap, so it opened a new branch of its business by inventing Purgatory: a temporary baking-place, apart from Hell, which it cost more money to escape. With characteristic tenderness it showed the way to escape even these temporary flames: by indulgences. You kissed relics, said prayers, made pilgrimages, went on crusades. . . . Then that very great and very holy Pope, Innocent III, found that if you made a money-contribution to the crusades you got the same spiritual benefits; and the very far from holy

Popes Boniface and John XXIII, extended the new money-system until you almost saw yourself going straight to heaven if you gave a beggarly quarter to the Church.

In any case, most people *were* damned. A great saint was graciously permitted to see souls falling into Hell, and she said that it was like a shower of snow-flakes. (The revelation did not extend to the point of telling her how many people *do* die every minute.) So one might as well be on the safe side: the pleasures of heaven were very risky, while the pleasures of sex were very accessible.

The psychology is plain enough; and, if I am asked to consider the ethic of it, I decline. Very shocking, of course, that people should violate their convictions in this way, and I should have no sympathy with such inconsistency today; but I know the Middle Ages so well that I am glad that people were generally and fiercely immoral. My indictment of the Church would not be nearly so polite and lenient as it is if people had listened to its ethical doctrines. As to the Popes, bishops, priests, monks, and nuns, I confess that my position as a well-known moralist makes me feel a certain incongruousness if I say that I am glad that *they*, professing a special zeal for Christian chastity, were generally immoral.

Yet I am; and it is only in reply to the stupid and persistent claim that the Church "improved the morals" of Europe that I return to the point and show how the general sexual license which we have already found continued to the end of the Dark Ages; and, as other

books show, until our comparatively virtuous times.

Let me first notice sexual irregularities or perversions which no one will regard leniently. One of the chief modern apologists says, as I have previously noticed, that unnatural vices were expelled from Europe by Christianity. I pointed out how appallingly untrue this is. As a matter of fact, we find that as early as the sixth century two *bishops* were punished for it by a horrible amputation, which was now the legal sentence. By the middle of the Middle Ages it had become so prevalent that even the milder sentences of the Church discipline were not enforced. We saw that Popes practiced it in the "sacred palace." But we have a very remarkable and authoritative document about it in the eleventh century, *The Book of Gomorrah* of Cardinal Peter Damiani, one of the most fanatical puritans of the time.

Damiani, who in the interest of Gregory VII and his puritan campaign, was particularly well informed about the morals of the clergy, tells us that pederasty, sodomy, and bestiality were terribly common amongst priests and monks. Moreover, he shows us, by quoting the Penitentials (Prayer Books) of that time, that these vices were known all over the Church and were so common that every shade and variation of them had a penalty assigned to it. I will venture to translate one passage which, reflecting as it does the morals of the Middle Ages, will prove a revelation to most of my readers; though no doubt religious writers, who suppress these things so that they



may represent Europe as virtuous, will retort that in reproducing the words of the saint I am dabbling in obscenity:

It is said [in the Penitentials] among other things: A priest not having taken the vows of a monk, who sins with a girl or a prostitute, must eat dry bread for two years and three Lents, on Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday; if he has sinned with a nun or a male, he must fast five years, if it is the custom.

Deacons, if they are not monks, must fast two years; monks who are not in office must fast for the same period. A cleric, not bound by monastic vows, who sins with a girl must do penance for six months; a canon must do the same, or, if he repeats the offense, for two years. If a man commits sodomy, some say that he must do penance for ten years, or, if it is the custom, longer; if he holds any office, let him be degraded and do penance as laymen do.

These laws faithfully reflect the morals of Christendom during the Dark Ages, and Hildebrand's own letters support Damiani. "Whether I look west, south, or north," the Pope tells his friend the Abbot of Cluny in 1075, "I scarcely see a single bishop who is free from censure in the way he secured office or in the manner of his life."

Gregory, as I said, set to work to reform Europe by enforcing the old law of clerical celibacy. As the bulk of the priests were then, in the eleventh century, married, we could guess, without any documents, what the clergy would become when their wives were taken from them. Lea's *History of Sacerdotal Celibacy* tells what they *did* become; the most corrupt and hypocritical body of "consecrated" men the world has ever known.

Cotter Morison, who is no enemy of the

Church (being a Positivist) has given some curious evidence of clerical morals in the thirteenth century. He is moved to warn us against its "deceptive siren song of beauty." It was, he says, "an age of violence, fraud, and impurity such as can hardly be conceived now." He takes it in its "ideal moment," and by analyzing the voluminous diary of his pastoral visits of the Archbishop of Rouen, he finds ample evidence of "the gross licentiousness of the monks and priests." The diary or "Register" is a quarto volume of more than six hundred closely printed pages, and impurity "is alleged on nearly every page in its most aggravated form." Mr. Morison is too lenient when he says "on nearly every page." In two passages which he quotes we have *eleven* charges against priests of sodomy, incest, adultery, and habitual fornication in *half a page*. And the archbishop merely warns them all not to do it again!

"On the whole," says Cotter Morison, examining this minute and most faithful account of clerical morals in the most beautiful period of the Middle Ages, "the convents of women seem to have been fairly correct." Seeing that the one convent he quotes has four nun-mothers (including the prioress) in ten lines of the report, and that the great archbishop did not dare to visit and correct these nuns on account of "their wealth and social position," this is certainly not harsh language for a moralist!

In point of fact, monks and nuns have been charged with comprehensive immorality ever since their weird history opened. St. Augustine wrote a book against monks in the first genera-

tion of their existence in Europe. Pope Gelasius (Ep. IX) sternly denounced the morals of the "consecrated virgins" before the end of the same century. St. Benedict, in founding the Benedictine order, expressly says that monasticism generally is grossly corrupt. Pope Gregory the Great, a century later, shows us that these Benedictine monks are as corrupt as the older monks. In Charlemagne's time we have synods of bishops saying that many convents are mere brothels, and that there is much infanticide in them. Abelard, in the eleventh century, tells us that there is hardly a nunnery "fit for an honest woman to live in."

A book could be filled with evidence about the morals of the monks and nuns, several books would be needed to accommodate the evidence for the corruption of the clergy and bishops, and the gay adventures of the Popes themselves would, as I have shown in my *Popes and Their Church*, fill a handsome volume.

But with the thirteenth century I reach the term of the Dark Ages, though not of the Middle Ages. While art and letters and social life improved, sexual license, in the Papal court, the priests' houses, and the monasteries and nunneries, broke into excesses as great as any of the Dark Ages. It is enough here to have described the condition of Europe during the seven hundred years after the adoption of Christianity. It is a quite unique page of history. What claims to be the highest ethical religion in the world was followed after its general adoption by a general degradation of character to which you will find no parallel in the history of pagan civilization.